

## **Day 1 – Friday, January 15<sup>th</sup>**

Seventeen people gathered at 2:30 pm with friends and family to launch the seventh trip from Lake Mills to Guatemala. Seventeen people, 41 suitcases (all numbered and named with either red (donations) or purple (personal items) duct tape), with excited hearts and dedicated spirits and a forever faithful God readied themselves to climb into the bus, ready to begin another “Great Adventure.”

We gathered - a little chaotic and a lot of excitement. Over the past few years we have been challenged by the weather – snow and ice and such, so in light this winter, I was relieved to have a forecast of mild temperatures and no precipitation. It put a smile on my face when the snow began to fall as we loaded the bus. Not a surprise, but not threatening either.

We loaded our suitcases – personal and donations into the bay of the bus, and then - with song and scripture and prayer - we slowed things down just a bit as we gathered in the sanctuary – preparing in the most powerful way for this trip

We have 33 people going on this trip, 18 with Lake Mills connections, eight companions whom we have traveled with before and others joining us for the first time from Gilbert - Iowa, Dekalb - Illinois, Colorado, and Wisconsin. Ten of thirty-three were going for the first time. Seven we would meet at the airport. And five of our group were already in Guatemala and we would meet up with them in Retalhuleu.

The week before we packed up 24 donation suitcases – **thank you for all your generosity** – again. I never think we have that much to pack – but before we began packing we had all the tables in the basement of Winnebago Lutheran filled with donations – medicines, vitamins, dental hygiene items, baby layettes, children’s clothing, school supplies and the such. More than we could take. (The remaining donations will travel down to Guatemala in March with a student group – they have the same arrangement to bring two suitcases but do not have the same resources on campus to collect all those donations, so we share. That way all our donations get where they are intended.) Along with the in-kind donations we also collected over \$6,000 in cash donations. **Thank you, Thank you!**

By 3:20 pm we were on the road. We stopped east of Waterloo – to pick up four more companions and have supper. We traveled with a bit of sadness on this trip. As we are all aware of the tragedy in Haiti, some of our friends traveling are deeply grieved. One of the lives lost in Haiti in the earthquake was Ben Larson. Ben was a fourth year student at Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque. He was in Haiti on an immersion experience for his January term, along with his wife and cousin. Ben was a close friend of two of our travelers - Erika Uthe – a fourth year seminary student, and Pastor Cathy Daharsh – who graduated in May 2009. We grieve with them, we remember them in prayer, and we comfort one another with a peace and hope that only God can give.

Our adventure began before we were able to get out of Iowa. Due to the road conditions in northern Illinois and some construction, our bus drivers chose to travel down to I-80 to get into Illinois. Somewhere between Cedar Rapids and Iowa City, the one driver came back to where I

was sitting to let me know that they had lost the heat(er) in the bus. Didn't know why, didn't know if it would change, and didn't know what to do. Ironically, many of us noticed the change but were thinking that the bus was just getting comfortable. It was Guatemala warm in the bus up to that point and it finally got to a comfortable range. But that soon changed. Just prior to leaving Illinois, they pulled over in a rest area to see what might be going on – it had begun to get cool, quite cool. The quilts that were traveling with us were being put to good use. Thank you again. We pulled over and the drivers went to check under the hood. It was not good - we had sprung an antifreeze leak and it was a steady flow. The drivers were getting coached by their terminal to see if they could fix it, but this was more than they bargained for and more than they capable to fix on the road. They had all but given up – “We are going to have to call for another bus.” Not the words you want to hear four hours from their bus headquarters and working to catch a flight in 6 hours and 3½ hours yet to travel. Larry Ritzert and Jim Sletten stepped up and decided to take a look. Immediately they saw the problem and they too agreed that this was not good. But they weren't quite ready to give up. Out came the duct tape - they tried to tape up the hole – the hose was too rotten and now too damp for the duct to take hold. And with that one of the drivers came around the corner with a chunk of hose, not quite the same length, but close enough to give it a try. Without batting an eye, Larry and Jim, with antifreeze running down their arms, pulled off the clamps and clamped on this suspect piece of hose, tightened the clamps, and exclaimed, “At least it was accessible.” We rolled down the road a few miles for the drivers to find a small convenience store and poured 6 gallons of antifreeze back into the reservoir. And within an hour, off we went, wondering if it would hold. It wasn't long before the blankets were peeled off and the sweatshirts pulled off as we had our “Guatemala heat” flowing through the bus again. Our heroes – Larry and Jim! And one thanks God for the gifts He gives to his servants. The adventure was on.

While we were stopped, and Larry and Jim were doing there thing, Estuardo called to see how things were going. After a “not good” and an explanation of what was going on, his response was “Oh my! Call me when you are rolling again!” I know they had begun to wonder what alternative plans could be made before they finally decided that any alternative plans would be too complicated and simply left it in God's hands. After we were rolling, and we called to let them know that we were on our way and that we would be there about an hour and half later than planned, but a 1½ before the flight – there was much relief in their voices. But they now had work to do. They immediate contacted those working the airline counters to tell them the situation and all worked together to open up a couple of counters to process our group exclusively. The airlines were super and worked us through that line as quick as ever. All and all, there was not much down time at the airport. Enough time to find the restrooms, but I never even had a chance to sit in the waiting area at the gate before they started loading the plane. That was not all bad. And the side benefit, flying on a full plane, and being the last ones to arrive, nine people in our group got bumped into first class – including the ones who saved the day.